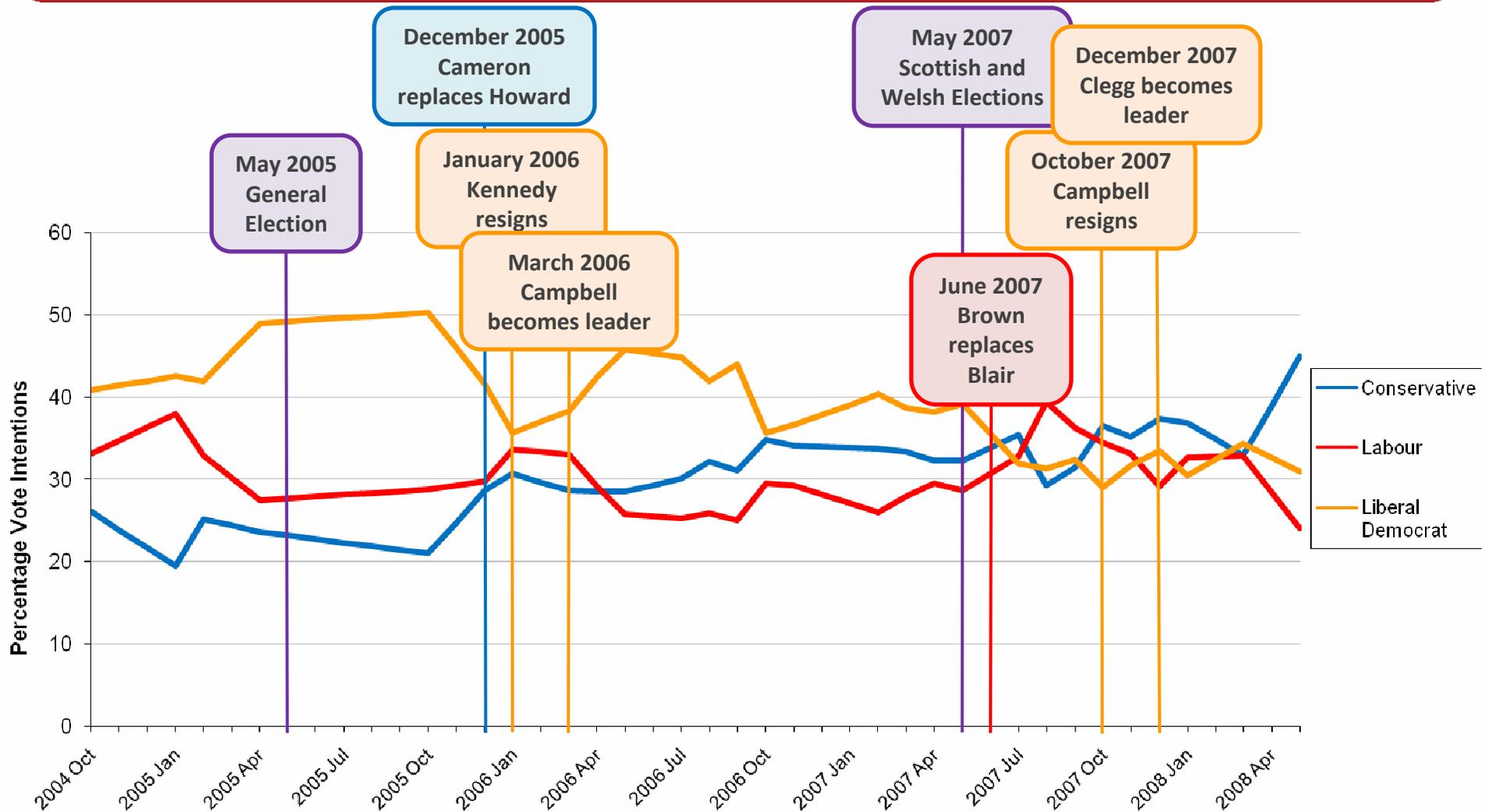
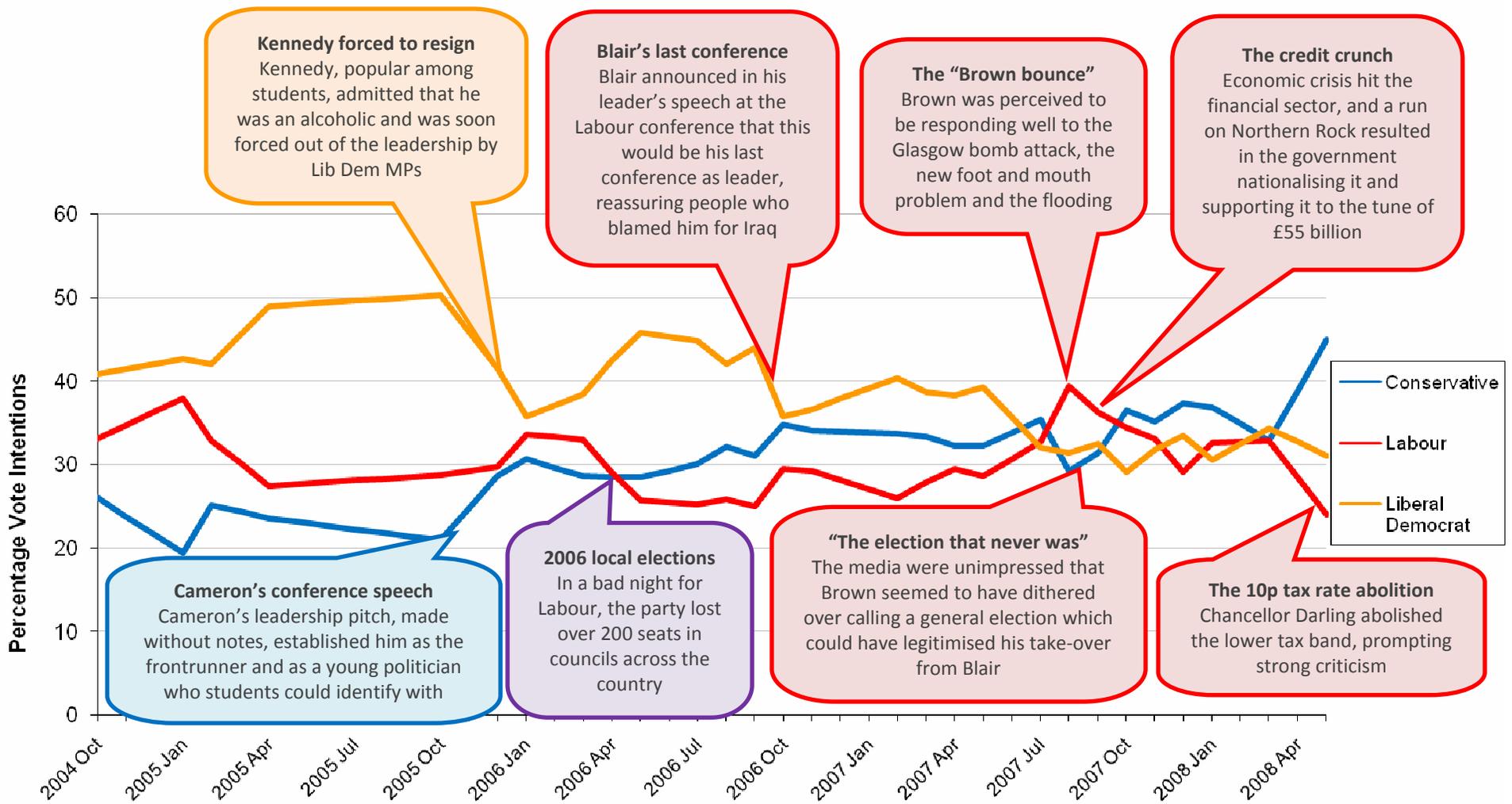


# Key dates in British politics October 2004 – May 2008



\* Chart depicts share of vote for 3 main parties only.

# What was happening in British politics to affect the share of the vote



\* Chart depicts share of vote for 3 main parties only.

## The Backdrop to *The Student Vote*

Opinionpanel's study started in October 2004, before the May 2005 election, in the month when Tony Blair announced that he would seek a third term but not a fourth. The next significant event in British politics happened soon afterwards, as Boris Johnson was sacked from the Conservative frontbench in disgrace by Michael Howard over allegations about his private life. Boris has proved consistently popular with students, with some members of The Student Panel even stating that they would vote for the "Boris Johnson" party, and this may have contributed to the Conservatives' decline in share in the second wave of the study, in January 2005.

In May 2005, Labour won their third consecutive general election, but this time with a much-reduced majority. Tony Blair delivered a chastened acceptance speech in his Sedgefield constituency. It was not only the Conservatives who benefitted, with a number of independents succeeding in former Labour seats: Dr Richard Taylor in Wyre Forest for Independent Kidderminster Hospital and Health Concern; Peter Law in Blaenau Gwent for Independent Labour; and most notoriously George Galloway in Bethnal Green and Bow for RESPECT. This was unusual – before Dr Taylor's election there had only been 6 independents in Parliament since 1950. Michael Howard, despite making large electoral gains which had not been expected before he took over from Iain Duncan Smith, announced his decision to stand down as Conservative Leader, but that he would only do so after he had finished reforming the party.

It was a dramatic summer. There were mass protests against poverty and the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as the UK hosted the G8 summit at Gleneagles, with calls to "Make Poverty History". Then, the day after London celebrated being awarded the Olympic Games for 2012, tragedy struck with the July 7<sup>th</sup> bomb attacks, bringing the war on terror to British soil.

Following Michael Howard's announcement that he was resigning as Leader of the Conservative Party, the Conservatives had drifted to a low ebb in the October 2005 wave of the study, on just 21 percent.

However, all this was about to change as a young Conservative MP who had only been in Parliament for four and a half years delivered a well-received speech at the Conservative Party Conference organised by Howard to help choose his successor. David Cameron, speaking for twenty minutes without notes, gave the performance of a lifetime to wow delegates with his vision of a new, more caring Conservative Party which would shed once and for all the label of "the Nasty Party". This new politics, with a charismatic, young potential leader – very different from Howard or Duncan Smith – seemed to impress students, and the Conservatives saw an immediate increase in their share in the December 2005 wave, rising by over a third to 29 percent.

The main losers from the Conservative gain were the Liberal Democrats: from October to December 2005, their share fell by 15 points to 36 percent. But this fall was not just down to changes in the Conservative leadership, but to changes in their own leadership, as Charles Kennedy was ousted following his admission of an alcoholism problem. Charles Kennedy's avuncular figure had always been popular with young people, and his expulsion by the Lib Dem parliamentary party was not popular. The Lib Dem vote partly recovered as Menzies Campbell settled in, but they would not again reach the same popularity among students as under Charles Kennedy. However, despite this fall, the Lib Dems still led the student share consistently for over a year and a half more under Menzies Campbell's leadership.

The spring of 2006 saw the unlikely spectacle of John Prescott admitting to having an affair with his diary secretary, followed by Labour crashing to heavy losses in the May local elections. Student support for Labour plummeted in the May 2006 wave, a reflection of their poor showing in the elections where they fell to behind the Lib Dems in the national vote.

This marked the first time that Labour support among students had fallen behind that of the Conservatives and, with the exception of the short-lived "Brown bounce", Labour continued to lag behind the Conservatives for the rest of the study.

## The Backdrop to *The Student Vote* (cont.)

July 2006 saw more serious scandal for Labour with Lord Levy, Tony Blair's close associate and chief fundraiser, arrested in the "cash for honours" affair, accused of promising honours such as knighthoods and peerages in exchange for large loans to the Labour Party. This did not affect Labour's already low standing in the student vote. In fact, the next major movement in Labour's share was upwards, gaining 5 points following Blair's announcement at the Labour Party conference that he would resign within the next year – an indication of how much of an electoral liability Labour's most electorally successful leader had become.

Blair was interviewed by police over the "cash for honours" affair in December 2006, the first sitting British Prime Minister to be quizzed over a criminal investigation. Yet far greater money troubles were brewing than "cash for honours", as the spring of 2007 saw the sub-prime crisis in the US housing market start to unravel, though its economic – and electoral – implications would not emerge till much later.

In May 2007 Labour lost ground in the local, Scottish and Welsh elections, Tony Blair resigned and Gordon Brown was finally appointed Labour leader, without any serious opposition. Times seemed good for Brown as he enjoyed the "Brown bounce", a resurgence in Labour's electoral fortunes that was reflected strongly in the student vote, with Labour rising to 39 percent in the August 2007 wave, their highest share since the study started. Brown was seen to have responded well to a number of challenges that presented themselves within his first few months as Premier. Terrorist attacks in London and Glasgow; the return of foot and mouth; and the floods that washed out the British summer: Brown returned from just a few hours of holiday in Devon to take control and provide a focal point for the nation's efforts. Brown's popularity prompted Labour to start making plans for a snap election to take advantage of the bounce.

But, worried by a slight Conservative upswing on the back of David Cameron's stirring speech at the Conservative Party conference, Brown seemed to lose his nerve and cancel Labour's election plans, prompting some newspapers to dub him "Bottler Brown". This marked the turning point in Labour's brief recovery, the start of a sharp downward trend.

Further crises hit the government in quick succession, none of which were perceived to have been handled as well as the summer crises. Northern Rock suffered the first run on a British bank in 140 years before eventually being nationalised, which taxpayers underwrote at a cost of fifty-five billion pounds. Two discs of child benefit claimant data were lost, putting the personal details of twenty-five million children and their parents at risk. Peter Hain, the Work and Pensions and Wales Secretary, was forced to resign after admitting to accepting illegal donations for his deputy leadership campaign. Most of all, the ongoing credit crunch kick-started by complex financial practices over the sub-prime housing crisis contributed to an escalating sense of unease about the future. Through this the parties remained very close in the student vote, with the Conservatives just ahead.

What finally caused the Conservatives to jump ahead of the rest and Labour to fall to their lowest position in the May 2008 wave of the study appears to have been the 10p tax issue, with students reacting angrily to Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling's abolition of the lower rate of tax. Combined with the Conservatives' strong showing in the local elections, including winning the London mayoralty, this created a strong effect on students' voting preferences.

### Links

[The Student Vote](#) - First comprehensive analysis of the political views of the student population over a four year period – by **Paul Whiteley, Professor of Government, the University of Essex**  
[Demographic trends](#) – An analysis of student party preference by key demographics

[Data tables](#) – Data analysis of key student voting questions and demographics over 33 waves  
[Press release](#) – Press release on the release of *The Student Vote* by Paul Whiteley and the latest data from Opinionpanel